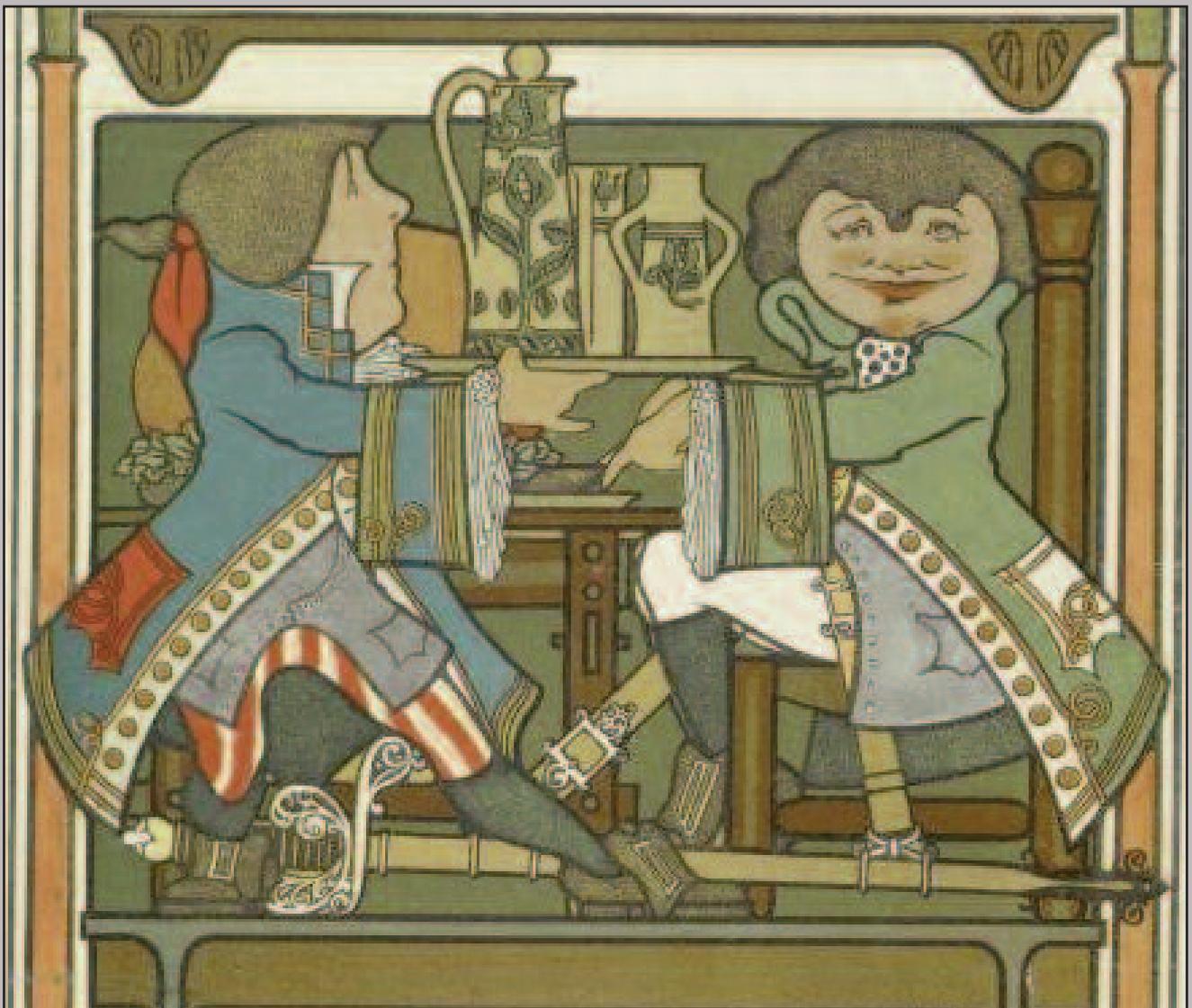


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The Blotter

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“Definition”

It's only November second, so please forgive me for not knowing with exactitude how the world has taken shape. I'm still in the thick of waiting and wondering what is going to happen, and what will happen after that. I trust that you already know, for good or bad, depending on your bent.

At the moment it's cold outside, but I still enjoy going out on the front porch with a good book and a cup of coffee, rapidly cooling, so that occasionally I must return to the kitchen to jostle the molecules in the microwave oven. I've recently finished reading the novel “Year of Wonders” by the terrific author Geraldine Brooks. If you have read any of her work, you know what I mean when I say that her attention to rhetorical detail is peerless, and if you haven't read anything by her, well, *go*. Do not wait. Download, purchase, borrow, acquire by any means necessary, her novels. It is not my intention, however, to do a book review. Better minds than mine do such things, and I think we are all better off because they do. We don't have to agree with everything they write, but at the very least they curate the works for us. We owe book reviewers thanks for taking on that task.

Rather I would like to talk about the word “nick.” In Ms Brooks' novel, she provides us with a lesson in word-history, in etymology, with this little snippet of a word. Nick. How do we understand it now-a-days? Nick is what we do when we shave too carelessly – chip out a bit of our flesh with the blade. I also wonder if it has some relation to the French word “niche” which means a small recess carved out of a wall, for a statue or some other decorative object. Nick is also one of those terms that is a strange reversal on itself. The word ‘nickname’ currently means an alternative to someone's given appellation, usually something shorter, easier to say, affectionate. Nick from Nicholas, for example. But supposedly it originates in the term “eke-name,” with *eke* coming from the Old English for “a part added on.” Which still makes a certain sense, as nicknames don't replace names, but are additional ways of referring to someone. Terms of familiarity or affection, derision or jest. My mom, for example, called me Garry most of the time, except when I was in trouble for eating all of the semi-sweet morsels she'd bought to bake something. Then it was the more formal *Garrison*, and when I heard that I knew that her wrath was about to descend on me.

So, is a nick a removal or an addition? I guess that depends on your point of view.

But it's also a slang term in British vernacular meaning anything from stealing to where you go if you're caught stealing. I like that (not the stealing, but how the single slang incorporates all of functionality.) Nick (steal) something, you get nicked (arrested), and sent to the nick (prison). And, if you look at Ms Brooks' work, in particular the episodes about mining, and I'm not going to take away the fun of your reading her book, but I think you will see that the online dictionaries and wiktionaries may have this wrong, or at least confused. Nick isn't a nineteenth century term, but a bit of the daily language from much, much earlier. In other words, the usage of the well-morph'd slang might feel like it belongs in *My Fair Lady* or *Mary Poppins*, but the term itself goes back to... *A Man for All Seasons*.

Somewhat tangentially, it seems to me that when we speak or write we have a tendency to merge the meanings of words together, to treat them as interchangeable synonyms in our minds. Take, for example, dread, apprehension, anxiety and anticipation. Are they similarly defined in the everyday dictionary of our minds? I suppose. But the truth is quite different. The etymology of "dread" is Old English - the fear of something that we think is coming. Anticipation's root meaning, on the other hand, is the Latin "taken before," or to be aware of something coming before it gets here. Apprehension, on yet another hand, is seizing an idea of something – in effect grasping what is coming. And in anxiety we have the Latin for *to trouble* and the Greek for *choke*.

The nuances are there. Anticipation? An awareness of something out there, in the future, known or unknown. Dread is fear of that unknown future. Apprehension is grasping at that future even before it arrives. And anxiety, the sense that the future is trouble indeed, sent to...take our ability to breathe.

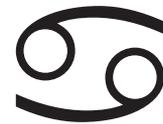
I appreciate that the word choices give us clarity, specificity of idea. That we don't always communicate that way? I suppose I get it. The world is urgent, loud, confusing. It doesn't always give us the extra moments to collect our thoughts. We need to talk to each other, ask questions. We need to really listen to the answers. If we don't understand, well, step forward and ask more questions. Don't give up.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

Ease the seat back...

“@Zandra”

by Gregory Josselyn

“Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world.”

—Mary Oliver

All I wanted for graduation was a Tiny House.

It made sense to me, at least. Skip the apartment runaround and get right to it — home-ownership. Plus, I was a theater major graduating in the middle of a recession, so I didn’t want to waste my time trying for acting jobs in L.A. like everyone else. The only job postings with the word “drama” in it were for hair salons and nail parlors. “Leave your drama at the door,” one listing read.

I explained to Mom and Dad that it might be a good opportunity to take a break from Manhattan, write a best-selling memoir about small living, and talk to other Tiny House people along the way.

When they asked how I would make money, we got into an argument about capitalism again, so I slammed my door and cried. “Fine, I’ll go be an anesthesiologist!” I said, while staring at a Furby on my dresser.

It was in that moment — face-to-face with that blinking animatronic creature — I knew I’d have to fund my freedom.

So, I charged it to my American Express credit card.

My Tiny House was on wheels, like most, but came with a retro design from the fifties which gave it

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a novel effect. It had baby blue shingles, white trim, and a new metal roof with a lifetime guarantee — as if I would grow old and die in it.

Inside, there were peach walls, teak cabinets with a magnetic catch, and a Formica dining room table that doubled as an ironing board. You had to climb a ladder to get to the bedroom. It was a loft hanging in the roof like a church steeple. It even smelled like church — old pew timber still porous after three-hundred-and-something years, hemlock and balsam ripening with age. You could almost taste it.

I parked the house in Kips Bay on Broadway Alley, New York City’s only unpaved road. At first, I assumed I’d find wild grass with rabbits dodging taxi cabs there, but it was a dirt road woven into the architecture of hipster condos going for the faux wear-and-tear look.

I fit in — thanks to my bowl cut, American Apparel shirt, and skinny jeans. I figured this would give my fellow residents a certain amount of comfort.

I lasted in Kips Bay for about a half hour before receiving a ticket from the city, so I had no choice but to hitch the house to my Volvo and drive with it in tow.

The eviction itself was a great excuse to live out my nomadic fantasy full throttle, I thought. I’d be a Henry David Thoreau for the

new century, or the next Cheryl Strayed at least.

But I ended up opting for a Great Lakes tour because it was there. Lake Superior, Michigan, Michigan–Huron, Erie, Ontario, the lot. It felt fitting and poetic. I know these lakes for their depths, so I figured the experience would come in handy for a cocktail party story someday. Or a good metaphor for a group therapy session in a pinch.

I posted a lot of lake selfies on Facebook and people liked me for it. Old classmates from high school were friend requesting me like crazy, as if I was some kind of rugged celebrity with all the answers. But in reality, I was living off of Kind Bars and filtering public restroom sink water into my Cleansi, a Brita knock-off that came without a handle.

“You should long-form blog about this,” someone named Zandra commented.

I guess she was a friend of a friend because I didn’t know who she was. I don’t even know how we got connected, it was like she hacked the system or something. But we ended up chatting on messenger a lot, even though she didn’t have a profile picture — it was a Gerber daisy photo instead.

Zandra was older, eighty-six, and said she had left her Floridian husband a few years ago and started over from scratch. I don’t know why.

I guess she took a special interest in me, since she had also done a road trip like that after her divorce, but to New England instead.

Zandra explained that she had

tried to track down a poet she liked, named Mary Oliver, in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

“I knew I wanted to be like Mary Oliver,” Zandra said, “I had this faith she would take me under her wing.”

By the time Zandra made it to Provincetown, though, Mary Oliver had moved. To Florida, it turns out, where Zandra had traveled from (go figure).

Still, Zandra stayed in Cape Cod in an apartment above a lobster restaurant and did the next best thing — she mimicked Mary Oliver’s writing routine to the letter. That meant circling Beech Forest at six am, scribbling on the human qualities of sandpipers at Race Point, or hiding number two pencils in tree branches by Provincetown cemetery.

Zandra wrote poems in her own style now and posted them every day on a very popular Facebook group called Poetry by Zandra and I.

Her sentences there resonated with me in ways others hadn’t. It was as though she was speaking on my behalf, naming unsayable experiences with a hopefulness I never realized was possible. I even tried reading other poems in the Harvard Review to neutralize myself, but they never measured up. I always went back to Zandra and shared them with everyone I knew.

Another interesting fact about Zandra is that she was always online. Always. But who knows from where? Had she parked herself at an internet cafe in Dubai,

building an entire empire of poetry followers the size of Katy Perry’s?

I guess she made a fortune with a viral poetry class she launched on the virtual continuing-education website, Udemy, called “Healing without Antidepressants.” She’s had over fifty-thousand sign-ups at twenty dollars a pop. A record.

One night, while parked in a Minnesota campsite, I couldn’t sleep so I idled my way through Facebook. Zandra wrote as if she were waiting all night for that little green dot to appear next to my name.

I wasn’t used to this kind of care from a semi-public figure like her. It was like bonding with a celebrity on an intimate level — getting to know their food preferences or plans for the long weekend.

“Are you there, Tom?”

“Yeah,” I wrote. “Can’t sleep.”

Zandra sent me a quote from the poet Robert Bly without explanation:

“It’s all right if the partridge’s nest fills with snow.

Why should the hunter complain if his bag is empty

At dusk? It only means the bird will live another night.”

“Haha. You’re like a poetry doctor,” I said.

She was.

The animated three dots (. . .) fired up, as if she were an internet psychic on fire.

“Revel in the emptiness, Tom. Experience it. Experience the discomfort as an experience itself. Make it worthy of your attention.”

Zandra said it’s liberating to let go like this, to abandon fantasies and five-year plans so you can work with the torments of life as if it was a material, a skein of yarn.

“It’s like knitting a scarf you keep plugging away at,” she added. “Depending on how you look at it, knitting a scarf for that long can be nice.” “That’s why people call it a meditation practice,” Zandra emphasized. “Practicing is the result, and it’s always in motion, doesn’t end. Until, well, the end.”

Our chats became spiritual in that sense. She would ping me with sentences like: “Thoughts of you always seem to drum up inconsequential magic — a nuthatch down my chimney, a toad in the bed . . . Good luck charms that bring the daily bread.”

But these musings would force me to come up with a multitude of variations for thank you, all driven by guilt. Many thanks. Namaste. Or, thanks much!

A series of metaphorical questions would boomerang back to me, like: “How is your heart today? Hard or soft? Soft or hard?” This always led me to my dissatisfaction with life and what to do with it.

“Have some fun,” she would reply. Or: “go for it.”

She often talked about loving the world to avoid regrets, and that always made me cry because I knew I was already lacking in this area.

But under Zandra’s wing, my self-worth was no longer measured in job titles or levels of achieved domesticity. It mattered more that I

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could find new language to describe thoughts and feelings and look for beauty in the ugliness of existence.

“Perceiving the ‘poetry of life,’ Tom — noticing things like the seven o’clock sunset or that free cookie in the bakery — is a success. ‘To feel these small miracles is enough’.”

Zandra hated small talk but rewarded me if I used certain keywords like ‘soul’ or ‘shimmering rain.’ That’s when she suggested I translate this language into poetry, so I did.

“I’m like a lily.
I open in the morning —
only to close again,
predicting torrential rain.”

To say that Zandra’s feedback was too generous is an understatement.

“Hmm, this is the start of something,” she wrote, and then said she had sent my poem to a writer friend of hers named Esther, who was a big deal in England. So, I sent her more and she sent out more.

“You’re one of those raw talents ripening as we speak, and everyone agrees,” she typed. “A little snarky, but we can work on it.”

It was like she had admitted me to a secret club with journaling as the entry fee. Maybe a place like Berlin or Paris *was* my destiny, where I would spend my nights at private gallery openings with kickoff dinners at five-star restaurants. Imagine all the people

with wire-framed glasses I’d get to kiss.

My natural response to Zandra’s mentorship was to apologize, but she said to stop that. I always felt selfish, or one-sided though, since she always changed the subject if I asked how *her* heart was. “Stay with me Tom, okay?” she would always add. “We — I — need more of you. More of Tom. Please?”

She said that I was like a ‘twin’ to her in the womb of the ‘great mother’ — Mother Nature herself. That an exploration into the mystery of life is not a solo act: “You twist left, and so do I. Your right is mine. Up and up. Down and down . . . together. We push our elbows against the uterus, our legs linked like a rope . . . We absorb each other . . . Our lungs want air — we want to see — but we wait, we wait . . . What do we do when we can’t wait anymore? When we are too big for this world?”

I didn’t hear from her after that.

No one did. A flood of hashtags and comments started popping up on my Facebook feed. Phrases like “@Zandra come back!” or “Where r u?” were everywhere, and hundreds of user reviews over at her Udemy site complained about her absence. “0 stars: Terrible service, no response and it’s been days,” a poetry student from Connecticut wrote. One fan even created a small but trending social media campaign, #PrayersforZandra, which got picked up by a small internet poetry magazine called

Ruminations. “A Digital Death: Online Poetry Teacher’s Disappearance Causes Heartbreak,” the headline read. I guess a high school student named Ruby approached her local police station hoping to start an investigation. “I’m waiting to hear, guys. Keep you posted. . . .” Ruby wrote. And Udemy refused to follow the many requests for her phone number, stating that they do not share user data without consent.

I also didn’t have Zandra’s phone number, last name, email, or any of the fundamentals we’re supposed to have with people we know. That’s why I turned to mylife.com, a virtual city records office with a lot of information. If I paid extra, I could get a full background report: potential arrests, foreclosure, bankruptcy, you name it. This made it sound like Zandra was some kind of hit and run criminal, or irresponsible at least.

I imagined her in a beat-up red and chrome convertible, dodging cop cars on an Arizona highway somewhere, with a knitted neck scarf flailing behind in the wind. It would be that metaphorical scarf that goes on forever, but real this time — the one Zandra’s been making for decades. Overhead helicopters would report this bandit’s unprecedented ability to knit one and pearl two with both hands on the wheel.

But the membership was a scam. Mylife.com linked me back to what I already knew: her address in Provincetown, private Facebook group, Udemy, and a reddit

account where she spent a lot of time commenting on a thread called: *Don't Retire, Inspire*.

Then I remembered Zandra's friend Esther, the big-deal-poet in Britain. I searched "Esther" in Zandra's friends tab on Facebook and sent a private message to all the Esthers I could find.

Nothing. Either Zandra had had a falling out with lots of people with the same name, or they all went missing alongside her, like some kind of poetry doomsday cult.

This led me to weed through Zandra's list of 1,002 friends individually. One of her friends had to know something and was holding out on us. "Hi, I'm friends with Zandra. She hasn't been online for weeks now, have you heard from her?" Copy, paste, copy, paste, paste, paste. Most people saw the message but never wrote back. Some were nice about it though, I got a lot of: "I've only taken her online class, sorry," or, "I wish I could help but we're just pen pals."

I realized I wasn't unique in this way — Zandra had been operating hundreds of chat windows this whole time, doling out advice like some kind of pro-bono therapist.

Rumors of Zandra's death on the Facebook group grew by the day. In some ways, it made sense. For one, Zandra was older — eighty-six. And two, her poems had already begun addressing mortality anyway, so was a fight with a terminal illness in the background? We didn't know.

Cynics bet she was a catfish.

Others thought she was a chatbot and data-mine experiment from Eastern Europe that got shut down.

Or she couldn't afford the internet anymore.

Anyway, everyone on the Facebook group wrote an "I miss you" message directed to Zandra except me.

I spent hours studying these digital eulogies.

"Zan, it's been three and a half weeks today, and I still can't believe you're gone," Susan DeCro wrote.

"I left him," wrote another.

A few of the memorial poems became popularized beyond the group, too. A girl named Lauren even got a book deal out of it.

Some of Zandra's extra special mentees pushed me to write one as well, as if they were disciples of Christ preparing for the resurrection. I yes-ed them to death, knowing that there was no way I could ever take on Zandra's final assignment.

"Write a poem praising the sunrise, Tom," she had instructed.

This was Zandra's last prompt before her disappearance.

"Eh, not sure about that," I said.

Zandra explained that my life was more than a series of problems and that, while it's tempting to want to get to the root of what's wrong with it, there's a lot going right.

"Start with the light. Easy."

I said that made me want to throw up.

"Yes," she wrote. "The more you hate it, the more you need it.

Treat the pain with the pain. It's like the Buddhists: all flowers need

mud."

"But —" I said. "Anytime I do that it comes out like a fifth-grader."

"And what's wrong with a fifth grader?"

"Nothing, I guess — it's — never mind."

It took me a good three months to get out of my head and write the thing. To freely write the thing for the Facebook group without excusing it with revisions or prefaces. However tempting it was to say that my ten-year-old niece wrote it, I said amen and pressed enter.

No-one commented or liked it.

My theory is that it got overshadowed by the new Zandra of the group — an older British woman named Maga from Mexico City. "My vulva is like this flower — reborn," she wrote to much applause.

Somehow, Maga got ownership of the group, too. I don't understand how. It went from Poetry by Zandra and I to Poetry by Maga and Me overnight, as if we erased Zandra from our collective consciousness.

But around the same time, I got a Facebook message back from Viv, Zandra's landlord and the owner of the lobster restaurant. Zandra lived on the second floor.

"Omg tom I just saw this!" Viv wrote, which wasn't true because it looked like she had seen it months ago with all the rest.

Viv said that Zandra's rent was on time, but she hadn't seen her for a couple days.

I explained how she had gone missing online and that people

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were panicking, asking their local police officers for help. . .

“Haha,” Viv replied. “Zandra’s like that, she’s fine. One day she’s a poet, the next day she’s keeping parrots. Don’t take it personally.”

What? Was I the only one concerned now?

So, I drove fourteen hours to this so-called lobster restaurant — and Zandra’s front door.

It didn’t take long to find it. You mention an odd name like hers enough times to a bunch of busybodies popping their heads out of doors and the key’s yours.

I knocked on her door, but no one answered.

I knocked again. Nothing.

The door was unlocked but swollen from humidity, so I gave it a push.

The room smelled like vodka.

And, through the corridor to the living room, there was vodka: Grey Goose. Everywhere. Empty bottles, half-empty bottles, semi-empty bottles, and full bottles with the cap off, as if someone had opened it and walked away.

In the kitchen, there were flies over supermarket sushi.

The toilet was running.

The apartment itself was like a living museum. Some weird combination of kitsch from the entire twentieth century in three adjoining rooms.

It was hard imagining Zandra downing shots here, with the rose-colored wallpaper and goose feather pillows in the background. This was more of a Dandelion tea and gluten-free cookie kind of place.

I had to assume the woman lying in the bedroom was Zandra, even though I prayed it wasn’t.

She was asleep — and tucked into a fitted top sheet and blanket, as if a flock of birds had swooped in through the window and done it. Her hands rested on her stomach in such a way that I had flashbacks to my grandmother’s open casket, which was creepy. There was an ink callous on her left palm.

Zandra was petite, short enough to have extra space at the end of the bed. Her hair was woven into a silver braid that went on forever, as if it had been growing her whole life. It was coiled on her pillow like an extension cord, which was surprising in its orderliness. She slept with a grin that unwrinkled the folds in her forehead.

I watched her stomach expand and contract. Four seconds-up, four seconds down, in a rhythm. She looked exhausted for sure — but maintained a certain radiance I figured only poets can achieve. Or it was the vodka. I don’t know.

She seemed unfazed by my entrance.

“Do you need water?” I asked, trying to normalize things a bit.

“Water,” she repeated. “Yess.”

I sat down on a chair next to the bed.

“It’s me, Tom,” I said.

“Tom,” she repeated again, and shifted her gaze downwards to the end of the bed, and up to her television set. It was a local news report on the health benefits of tomatoes.

“Where’d you go?” I asked, in a

soft, elongated hum. “It worried me.”

She turned towards the window as if to say something but didn’t.

I asked her what she wanted to do, and she said sleep.

“Long day,” she said, while grabbing at her eyelashes. It looked like she was checking if there were fake ones plastered on. There weren’t.

I nodded and suggested she change into her pajamas to get more comfortable.

“I’ll be right out here if you need anything,” I said, while pulling the door but leaving it open a little bit. Dresser drawers opened and shut, which I took as a good sign.

Twenty minutes later, there was a slow brewing silence coming from the bedroom. It wasn’t the silence of someone gone to buy milk, it was the silence of someone gone on a trip to another state.

“You okay in there?” I asked, but not wanting to know the answer.

“Zandra?”

“I’m coming in,” I said, while opening the door from its edge with my eyes closed. The hinges squeaked.

Zandra was lying on the bed with her feet dangling at the end, socks half off. Her pajama pants were thrown to the floor, as if I had contaminated it with some kind of toxic property unknown to man.

“Can I help you at all?”

She was staring at the plaster swirls in the ceiling.

“Zandra? Can I help you?”

“No. I’m fine.”

I hadn’t expected Zandra to be this curt, but I took a deep breath, trying not to take it personally as Viv had suggested.

“— Give me your arm, it will only take a minute.”

“Stop,” she said — lifting her head and neck up in such a way that must have taken a lot of energy on her part.

“Back off.”

It was as if Zandra had cracked glass with these words. There was a vengeful quality to them, too, and I wondered if this situation was a microcosm of a larger issue. It seemed as if she was taking a lifetime of resentment out on me and a pair of checked pajamas.

Zandra was so nice to everyone online, but not everyone was nice back. The nicer you are out there in the world, the more naive people think you are, so it seemed like she was role playing this dynamic but in reverse. It made me think that people with these sorts of issues must have to work harder to be positive; just because you’re a transcendentalist doesn’t exclude you from the difficulty that is existence.

I didn’t take the bait, but it took me about a minute and a half to unhinge myself from her spell and walk out the door.

Outside, I had hoped to find some kind of Narnia-like trail to the beach, with the poet Mary Oliver up ahead. She’d be here on vacation, visiting her old haunts, jotting down her usual observations on Great Blue Herons, and taking the occasional

break with her head tipped to one side and pen in the air. I would call out to her while apologizing, explaining that her greatest living fan was a floor up, and that if she could bring herself to stop by for a minute, she might heal this woman’s life.

But the restaurant grounds only consisted of a parking lot and a no trespassing on beach sign, so I let the fantasy go like all the rest.

I meditated for a bit while taking a breather on a bench until I fell asleep. I woke up to the sound of an older gentleman tending to the shrubs with scissors, clipping the edges to perfection. It was hard to say if someone hired him to do this, or if he was a bored resident looking for something to do.

I took this as my cue to head back upstairs, so I wiped off the back of my pants and approached it as if heading into some kind of life-determining SAT test. My stomach and chest felt paralyzed, so I let my legs and feet do their usual work as much as possible while the rest of my body resisted.

Zandra was under the comforter covers now. She lay on her back, eyes closed and hands interlocked. The socks were on the floor, next to the abandoned pajamas. Her in-and-out breaths were expansive, receiving and releasing over and over. It was like she was straddling two worlds; both here and not here, present and departed at once. For all I knew, she was experiencing something wonderful somewhere else, something better than what this room or I could offer. This

might be a new state of being in which she could write poetry all the time without interruption, locked inside the monastery of her imagination. Wherever or whatever she was, there was nothing I could do to remedy or resurrect this situation. There was nothing to remedy or resurrect.

I dressed her in a robe I found in the closet and lifted her up into my arms — swinging her onto my back and shoulders, stomach first.

The pink furnishings seemed to fade to black as I took one last look at the apartment and closed the front door.

With Zandra by my side, I paused in a strange, mixed sense of relief and shame before sneaking down the emergency exit stairwell.

The roads were vacant in their busyness. The moving trucks, rest stop signs, and stretches of highway barely there. In the back seat and through the rear-view mirror, all I could see was Zandra at rest — still breathing, still experiencing, her lips curled upwards in a smile.

By the time she opened her eyes to consciousness, US-6 had become MA-North. It was dark, but the multiplicity of headlights had created a collective glow against the highway signs.

Zandra didn’t flinch as she watched cars drive past. It seemed as if she was replaying something memorable in her head. She would laugh with a deep sigh of nostalgia.

I took out a folded piece of paper from out of my pocket and read out loud from it as I drove while looking up at her.

“This is for you, Zandra,” I

The Blotter

said. She recognized me for a moment but went back to counting cars again.	to sky to trees to window, but it's now a mosaic on my bedspread and wall, lounging along with me.	I watch as it tremors and twitches between the lines of my closet moldings, until my head and neck is so submerged that I close my eyes against it.
“Seeing Red.’ The sun is a giant boob desperate for my attention.	It moves slower than the mouse under my bed and the daddy-long legs in the corner.	But even with eyes closed, this light is within me, it penetrates through the dark of my lids until I see red.” ❖
I hold my iPhone up to it, and then release. This light traveled from space	It separates itself into tiny slivers that slip under the covers and inside pin holes that once held up posters.	

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

Dream Journal - October

I put my fingers to the candle's flame, but there is no heat. Instead, it is a very fancy electric bulb, one of those that flickers when it is left alone as if there were a slight breeze. It doesn't provide much light, but it is only dusk, or maybe dawn. I don't know which.

My shoes were on a moment ago, but now I am barefoot, or almost so. One sock. A single sock provides no value at all, neither to protect or keep warm. And it seems to throw me off balance. I limp. It is a concrete sidewalk, heaved by ice and heat over the seasons. I don't want to stub a toe.

I follow the sidewalk around, past houses I don't recognize as my neighborhood. Reach a corner, where the streets cross, but I don't step off. I take the corner and begin a trudge uphill, bending at the waist as if it were stairs I am climbing.

A flutter over my head, something coming close in the branches of a bush. I stop. A small bird, I cannot see it so I know it is small, enough to hide among the leaves. It chirps, a harsh sound like fingernail scraping on a file. Scrit-scrit! What a shame, I think, for a bird to have only this song available.

But there is another scrape sound, somewhere out in front of me. A reply, from another of the same. Its mate, maybe. Or a child grown and left the nest. This one calls again. Scrit-scrit! And the return call is immediate. OK, then. It's good to be able to recognize your own, out of sight but still there, even if it is not beautiful to my ear, not a song.

GD - cyberspace

“Smoke”

by Sobia Ali

Years later, Moses meets the calf grazing on the steep mountainside. The calf is old, flank sagging, hindquarters dwindling. Through the veil, Moses barely recognizes him.

Hi, he says.

The calf focuses his shortsighted gaze.

Hi Moses, he says.

I thought you were dead, Moses says.

‘No dear, he says. I just wanted to get out of that place, to be able to look at it all differently.’

Under the sunset sky the remnant of golden sheen on him glints for a moment. There is silence.

Moses moves forward, pats the calfskin.

The calf sighs,

‘Those days!’

‘Yes!’

‘You coming down the mountain fast as lightning’

‘Oh, yes’

His fingers stray to the dewlap, caressing.

‘Your brother Aaron, the calf whispers excitedly. Then,

‘How I miss him. O Lord! How we both miss him’

The sky darkens. Moses’s head droops on the calf’s shoulder joint.

White smoke drifts towards them, curling out of the humble dwellings of Israelites whose outlines blur into the horizon.

three by donnarkevic

“Stoning the Adulterer”

After he finishes the evening press,
drag him from his hovel
to the stoning pit
outside the habitable limits.
Like a Fascist, show no mercy
as you trip him
face down in glacial debris.
Weigh options on the scale
of a hand
fisting a shard of limestone
from the ruins.
Any will do.
Do not stop
like cell phone-ready tourists
to record the event.
Fulfill the duty like a sculptor,
and obey the word
of the stone.

"Furnishing the Vatican"

All remains barren in hopes
of conceiving a child.
Ideal beauty hangs.
The environment challenges
human existence.
Through modeling soft cranial bones,
the head widens.
The neck elongates,
fat rolls symbolizing prosperity.
Low on the walls,
the mouth purses
pieces of silver
brocaded armchairs
where breasts surrender,
the navel
an indication
of a brass imperial flourish
or a dead vine.

"Our Lady of Sorrows,"

without teeth to chew
through the umbilical,
continues to carry the dying child
like a floating anchor
in the liquor amnii. She swallows
angelfish in an attempt
to rescue the clockwork running
out of time. Her breasts, swollen
with rancid milk, attest
to the black swan,
a Pompeii cast agonizing
like one in a garden of ashes,
discovering an Earth
created by fire.

"Somewhere, Oklahoma 1986"

by Dustin Orin Talley

Inside some file where
pictures of our past are kept
is a drawing of myself,
charcoal I think,
and dark,
as if the artist were not
given the gift of light.
The edges are scribbled,
my elbow protrudes itself into
the car seat behind me
and my nose sometimes hits my lip
but still I recognize the picture,
remember the context:
It was 1986 and the radio was on,
it was dark and you were driving.
It was cold.
I wanted to hold your hand but
the other end of the bench seat
was miles away.
Oh, and I hated you.
By the tone of the singers voice I knew,
even at five years old,
that regret was coming,
words like foreign shapes
strangled by ropes of rebarb and black holes
coming at my face
and maybe there is a drawing of this moment
because it was the moment of a disappearance.
You had just told me that we were leaving dad.
If the frame were wide enough
to frame your face
I'm sure that there would have been tears visible even in the darkness
And the artist would have had to use
some shade of red
But I realize that now only
in retrospect.

At that time, that moment,
 with lines leaning into one another
 I was surrounded by bars
 and black holes that swallowed me
 and what you will see
 if you stare at the picture long enough
 is part of a left leg that's been erased
 hips halfway gone
 and if you stare long enough
 there won't even be a boy
 but an empty bench seat
 where you drove a car
 through the darkness
 alone

Contributors

Gregory Josselyn of eastern MA writes, "I come to this story after spending three years caring for elderly, yes, but I also have solid experience as a writer – most recently, writing a narrative podcast under a British Council Grant and a performance about OCD. In the fiction arena, my work has been published in the *Raleigh Review* and *Burningword Literary Journal*."

Sobia Ali lives in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. Sobia Ali is an student of English Literature in India. Her work has been featured in *Atticus Review*, *The Indian Quarterly*, *The Bosphorus Review of Books*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Gone Lawn*, *The Punch Magazine*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *Manawaker Studio Flash Fiction Podcast*, *trampset*, *Lunate*, *Kitaab*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, *ActiveMuse*, *Ombak Magazine*, *Close To The Bone*, *Squawk Back*, *Secret Attic*, *Indian Periodical*, *Tigershark Publishing*, *Melbourne Culture Corner*, and forthcoming in *The Aleph Review*, and *Sahitya Akademi's Indian Literature* and elsewhere. She is currently working on a novel.

donnarkevic writes, "Buckhannon, WV. MFA National University. Recent work appears/will appear in *Street Cake*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, and *Solum Literary Press*. A Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee. Poetry Chapbooks include *Laundry*, published in 2005 by Main Street Rag. FutureCycle Press published, *Admissions*, a book of poems, in 2013. *Many Sparrows*, a book of poems, was published in 2018 by The Poetry Box"

Dustin Orin Talley is a poet who lives and writes in Durham NC.

We're Back !!!



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No, we weren't lost on some uncharted desert isle ...

we just stayed online, since most of the places we'd distribute to were closed. Now, though, we're cautiously re-entering the physical world, starting with This Issue!! Thanks for sticking with us!!

(P.S. The missing online issues are available Free! at our website.)

"The Blotter" Magazine

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